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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014
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SUBJECT: LEE MYUNG-BAK AND MONK MYOCHUNG: TWO PEAS FROM A
POD?

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Grand National Party (GNP) candidate Lee Myung-bak is virtually assured of a victory December 19, but according to a contact who has been covering the Lee camp since summer 2006, a victory December 19 is just the first in a series of goals Lee and his top advisors have laid out. In the April 2008 National Assembly elections, Lee feels he must secure a clear majority in the National Assembly in order to accomplish his reform-based agenda. In internal meetings, senior Lee advisors said that they hoped Lee's presidency would be a successful version of the failed Myochung uprising of 1135 AD. In this rebellion, a group led by monk Myochong hoped to reform the Koryo dynasty and implement far-reaching reforms based on pragmatism, and move the capital to Pyongyang.

Vision for Reform

¶2. (C) Park Min-hyuck, a trusted Dong-a Ilbo reporter who has been dispatched to the Lee Myung-bak campaign since summer 2006 told poloff on December 7 that Lee hoped for a sweeping victory in the presidential and parliamentary elections so he could carry out his grand vision of reform. Mr. Park explained that Lee and his closest advisors, brother Lee Sang-deuk, former Gallup Chairman and Pohang native Choi Shee-joong, and lawmakers Chung Doo-un, Park Hyung-joon and Chung Jung-bok pointed to the failed uprising almost 1,000 years ago for inspiration and vision for Lee's campaign and presidency.

¶3. (C) In internal meetings with these key players in late 2006, Park recounted that in intense strategy sessions (usually with some soju or whiskey close at hand) the key team members. Park said that the core of the campaign centered around Lee's brother and Vice Speaker of the National Assembly Lee Sang-deuk and their old friend Choi Shee-joong. Choi is widely acknowledged as Lee Myung-bak's political mentor and the three have known each other since childhood. Shortly after Choi officially joined the Lee camp in June, he told poloffs that he had picked Lee Myung-bak as the most qualified candidate and told Lee he would help him get elected. Park noted this was the public line, but in reality, Choi had been supporting Lee from the beginning, only able to publicly back Lee after he divested his controlling share from Gallup Korea, a polling firm. Park

said that Choi had gradually taken over key functions of the Lee campaign team since he had "a heap of" money he was willing to spend on a private office and to feed staff and supporters. Proximity to the candidate also made Choi a key player in all moves in the campaign. Park said he expected Choi, while not in any official post, would control the transition team and the most important nomination process for the April elections.

14. (C) When asked about some other members of Lee's camp, Park explained that since Lee had no solid regional base, like Chung Dong-young in the Jeolla Provinces, Lee had accepted all comers into his camp. However, Park noted, once elected, many of these hangers-on would be let go as Lee would shape his administration picking only the most adept politicians and administrators that shared his vision for reform.

Pragmatism - What Does it Mean

15. (C) The principle of pragmatism would guide Lee's every move starting with the National Assembly elections, Park asserted. In theory, the process would entail all of the possible lawmakers being assessed and if they fit the "Myochung" profile supporting reform and a pragmatic approach to governance, they would receive a nomination, no matter if they supported Park Geun-hye or another candidate during the primary.

MOFAT-NSC

16. (C) Park said that the Foreign Minister would come from the Korea University-based team of advisors led by former FM

Han Seung-joo and professor Hyun In-taek and the National Security Advisor would be drawn from the group of advisors not based at Korea University led by Kim Woosang from Yonsei University and Kim Tae-hyo from Sungkyunkwan University. He suggested that it would be unlikely for anyone who held senior positions in the Roh administration to take the top spot in the foreign ministry. Whoever was chosen, Lee's first foreign minister could be quite powerful because Lee would likely focus his energies on the economy, leaving the foreign minister to shape foreign policy with little oversight or friction from the Blue House or other ministries.

17. (C) Additionally, it was unlikely the Ministry of Unification (MOU) would be a key player in a possible Lee administration since some aides have insinuated that MOU would be better off as a part of MOFAT. Park said that Lee truly "hated" public workers and hoped to slash the number on the public dole during his rule and incorporating MOU into MOFAT would be an easy way to accomplish this.

Comment

18. (C) Reporter Park is close to the campaign and to the candidate. He has provided accurate insights to the Lee campaign over the past months. While it is not clear what role the "Myochung" model will play in a Lee presidency, Lee does have a new approach to politics, starting with his background as a CEO. His lack of strong political or regional base also indicates that he needs some new model or vision for his presidency to succeed. So far, his centrist economy-first policies and focus on support in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province have worked. Because of this, victory on December 19 is virtually assured. It remains to be seen if he can keep the GNP together for the April elections, but if he does Lee just might be able to institute significant changes. One goal he will likely not pursue if elected is monk Myochung's goal to move the capital to Pyongyang.

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